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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000377

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SUBJECT: CODEL KAUFMAN-PRESIDENT ASAD MEETING MAY 28

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 (b) and
(d).

1.(C) SUMMARY: Senator Edward Kaufman and Representative Tim Waltz met with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in Damascus on May 28. Asad said he is looking for the Obama Administration to put forward a "road map" outlining a way forward in the U.S.-Syrian relationship, and that Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim would float the idea with Secretary Clinton during their planned June 1 telephone conversation. Asad wondered about U.S. thinking on the sanctions issue, and asked rhetorically whether one goal of U.S.-Syrian re-engagement might be the removal of these "obstacles." He expressed irritation with a recently released Country Terrorism Report re-identifying Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism, and questioned how the USG could take such a step while sending an envoy to Damascus to ask for security cooperation. Asad made a pitch for four-way "Syria-U.S.-Turkey-Iraq" collaboration to improve the security and political situation in Iraq. He maintained that stabilization of Iraq would slow the flow of foreign fighters across Syria's border with Iraq more effectively than new border controls. Asad hinted Syria might be open to renewed security cooperation with the U.S., but warned he would carefully evaluate "risk" and would not enter into an agreement if, in his view, it had the potential to backfire on Syria. On Lebanon, Asad told the CODEL not to confuse Syria's undeniable influence -- the product of historical and cultural ties -- with direct interference, and maintained that Syria was not "trying to dictate one party over another" in the upcoming Lebanese elections.

2.(C) SUMMARY, CONTINUED: On Israel, Asad said there was no time to waste in re-invigorating the peace process, but at the same time claimed that he saw "no partner" in Israel. While the Obama Administration left Asad "optimistic" on the prospects for peace, Asad did not believe the USG had arrived at a "clear vision" for peace. He asserted Special Envoy Mitchell needed to focus on the concerns of countries "whose lands are occupied," including Syria, while taking into consideration the opinions of other countries in the region. He proposed the U.S. manage the peace process from the "top down," providing support and a "guarantee," while other countries (like Turkey) focus on the details of the process from the "bottom up." Asad said he hoped any process would include clear benchmarks and "staged goals." He told the CODEL Syria's relations with Turkey were better than its relations with "any other country," and credited the turn-around to "transparency" on both sides. He praised President Obama, calling him the "best hope" for Muslims around the world. In response to a question from the CODEL, Asad said he expected the President's upcoming speech in

Cairo would send a clear message on the need to respect all religions -- a key point in secular Syria, he added. END SUMMARY.

3.(C) Senator Edward Kaufman (D-Delaware), a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Representative Tim Waltz (D-Minnesota) met with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad on May 28. Political Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban and Foreign Ministry North American Office Director Lamia Harriri accompanied the President, along with a Syrian note-taker. CODEL members were accompanied by Charge' d'Affaires, Foreign Policy Advisor to Senator Kaufman Halie Soifer, and econoff.

TURNING POSITIVE SIGNS INTO CONCRETE ACTIONS

4.(C) President Asad opened the conversation by stating the U.S.-Syrian bilateral relationship had entered an overall positive phase. The challenge before us, he said, was to find a way to translate the "positive signals" that the Obama Administration was sending into "concrete actions." Senator Kaufman agreed, telling Asad that the new Administration was making a concerted effort to bring peace to the region, and this presented an opportunity for U.S.-Syrian relations that "hadn't previously existed."

5.(C) As in past meetings with visiting Congressional delegations, Asad laid out Syria's historical, geographical and political significance, calling his country the "hub of the Middle East." He said Syria had always recognized the importance of its bilateral relationship with the U.S., "even at a time in the 1970's when (Syria was) reliant on Russia."

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6.(C) Asad said he believed President Obama "seemed committed to carrying out his campaign promises regarding the Middle East." Asad noted Syria had opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but said President Obama's clear intention to withdraw troops from Iraq "removed the biggest bone of contention" between our two countries. "There is now no conflict of interest, no real issue on which we disagree," Asad said. The U.S. and Syria both sought unity, stability and an end to terrorism in Iraq, he said. "The conflict lies in our different approaches, in our behaviors," Asad explained.

ANGER OVER STATE TERRORISM REPORT

7.(C) Asad accused his USG interlocutors of having adopted the "wrong approach and wrong methodology" in their relations with Syria, and revealed his irritation with Syria's re-identification as a state sponsor of terrorism in the Department's 2008 Country Terrorism Report. (Note: The report was released on April 30th, just prior to the visit of A/AS Feltman. End note.) Asad suggested the USG was being inconsistent, saying they had come to Syria "to ask us to help fight terror," while at the same time damning Syria in the Country Terrorism Report. This, Asad said, "proved the State Department doesn't believe its own report, because you don't ask a thief to protect your house."

A U.S.-SYRIA "ROAD MAP"

8.(C) Asad told Kaufman and Waltz that the SARG is looking to the USG to provide them with an "executive plan" outlining a way forward on the U.S.-Syria bilateral relationship. In a surprising use of language, Asad told the CODEL what was needed was a "road map" to U.S.-Syria relations: "We must know what is your goal, what is my goal." When asked by the CODEL what his goals were, Asad replied that his goals were regional -- with a priority on securing peace in Iraq -- in contrast with the U.S., whose interests were global. Asad then abruptly declared that Syria was "not interested in North Korea" although he recognized that the U.S. was.

U.S. SANCTIONS AS AN OBSTACLE

9.(C) Asad also made clear his desire for direct contacts with high-level Washington officials. Kaufman reminded Asad that Secretary Clinton had been trying to arrange a phone conversation with Syrian FM Walid al-Muallim. Asad told Kaufman that Muallim planned to speak with the Secretary on Monday, June 1, and Muallim planned to float Asad's bilateral relations "road map" idea with the Secretary. Asad then directly raised the issue of U.S. sanctions policy, saying Syria wanted to know what the U.S. "thinks" about the Syria Accountability Act, and asking, rhetorically, "Are we going to work on this as a goal, to remove these obstacles?"

IRAQ

10.(C) On Iraq, Asad made a pitch for four-way "Syria-U.S.-Turkey-Iraq" collaboration to end sectarian strife and improve the security situation, and warned continued "division" in Iraq could spread throughout the Muslim world, "from Morocco to Indonesia." Asad characterized Syria's 2002 counter-terrorism cooperation with the USG as "very helpful" to both countries, but said, as the "political situation worsened," it became too difficult for Syria to maintain this cooperation. "We have the knowledge," Asad said, "but we had to stop sharing it because of the deterioration in our relationship." He hinted Syria might be ready to cooperate with the USG on counter-terrorism issues once again. Asad disclosed a recent telephone conversation with U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, saying he had told the Senator the U.S. and Syria "have a shared interest at the (Iraq) border" and Syria sought a "concrete proposal" from the U.S. When Kaufman asked Asad outright what the SARG was looking for in such a proposal, Asad retreated, saying the U.S. was wrong to focus on Syria-Iraq border issues, as the "real issue" in Iraq was the "chaos" which attracted extremists. He said UK FM David Miliband had congratulated Asad during a November 2008 visit to Syria on having slowed the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. "I told him that we didn't do a thing," Asad said.

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"It's the improving political situation in Iraq that has slowed the flow of terrorists across the border, it's because of Maliki." Asad characterized the USG approach in Iraq as "separating out" individual issues for review, when what was needed was a "comprehensive vision, a comprehensive strategy."

11.(C) Asad then asserted that, even with cooperation from the Iraqis, Syria "can't control" its border with Iraq because the SARG lacked necessary technology, including night vision goggles. He re-iterated that trying to control the Syria-Iraq border was not Syria's main concern: "Even if we cut the flow of terrorists (from Syria into Iraq) from 1,000 to 100, that's still 100 people who are going to Iraq to become suicide bombers," Asad said. He suggested the USG "not waste time" on technical issues at the border when what was needed was "more political cooperation." Waltz again raised the issue of foreign fighters in the context of the threat posed to American troops and the risk to American lives. To this, Asad responded that he that he was "not worried about American lives," but rather was worried about "Syrian lives."

12.(C) He also said Syria was working to discover terrorist cells within its borders, and was focused on disrupting logistical and other assistance to these cells. Asad claimed backlash against the U.S. presence in Iraq had re-introduced terrorism to Syria after a two-decade hiatus, and said terrorists within Syria now numbered more than 4,000. Asad told CODEL members that he sought a certain type of security cooperation with the USG "that wouldn't just identify the location of targets," but would also help identify the logistical networks enabling these terrorists. However, Asad warned he would be selective in reviewing potential security cooperation agreements: "If (the USG) gives me the wrong plan, I would not cooperate, because, if it fails, Syria

would get blamed, not CENTCOM. We are evaluating the risk," Asad said.

LEBANON

13.(C) On Lebanon, Asad told the CODEL that State Department officials had asked Syria not to interfere in the Lebanese elections. He said Syria has an undeniable influence in Lebanon, due to cultural and historical ties. This influence, he said, should not be confused with interference. He was adamant that Syria was not trying to "dictate one party over another" in the upcoming elections.

ISRAEL

14.(C) On the prospect of peace with Israel, Asad declared he was ready to "start forging a plan and opening a dialogue," but lamented that Syria saw "no peace partner in Israel" for the time being. He predicted a Syria-Israel peace process, once begun in earnest, would take "less than two years" to complete. "Obama and Mitchell make us optimistic about peace," Asad said. In Asad's opinion, the U.S. did not yet have "a vision" for the Middle East, and Special Envoy Mitchell must visit all of the countries concerned, including Syria, in order to build a comprehensive strategy. "Syria, Lebanon and Palestine are the countries on the table. Mitchell must seek the opinions of the other countries in the region, but it is Syria, Lebanon and Palestine whose lands are occupied." He added the world looked to the U.S. to "provide a guarantee" for the negotiations, and work for peace "from the top down," while other countries more familiar with the history and culture of the region, like Turkey, could work for peace "from the bottom up, gathering all the details." Asad said he was impatient to achieve peace with Israel because, "if we don't achieve something now while Obama is President, it will be difficult in the future." He called for the process to employ clear benchmarks and "staged goals." Kaufman told Asad that he believed Mitchell would soon visit Syria, and encouraged Asad to "lay out Syria's interests" for him.

TURKEY

15.(C) When asked by CODEL members about the state of Syrian-Turkish relations, Asad declared Syria's relations with Turkey are better than its relations with "any other country, even Iran." He attributed the turn-around in

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Syrian-Turkish relations to "transparency on both sides," and to the two countries' work to expand areas of common interest. By building on historical and cultural ties, Asad said, Syria had managed to turn conflict over water issues, political differences, and security problems into cooperation on these same points. Asad then drew a contrast between positive relations with Turkey and Syria's relations with Iraq. "Iraq is Arab," he explained, "and on a popular level there are historically good relations. But what is missing is a vision. There is a lack of good will (between governments)."

OBAMA'S UPCOMING SPEECH TO THE MUSLIM WORLD

16.(C) Kaufman asked Asad what he hoped to hear in President Obama's upcoming speech to the Muslim world. Asad replied Muslims trust Obama and "think he is a good person," and his election presented the "best opportunity for us, ever." He hoped that the President, in his upcoming speech, would "send a clear message" on the need to respect all religions, and added this was an important point for a secular country like Syria. He expected the President to reiterate his commitment to comprehensive peace, and hoped he would take the opportunity to present "more details" on his plan for the Middle East. President Obama's comments on terrorism in his inaugural address were "very good," Asad said. He suggested Obama again focus on a collective desire for peace, security

and a better standard of living. Kaufman asked Asad if he might consider making a speech like this himself? Clearly flattered by the suggestion, Asad replied that he had tried to convey these sentiments through domestic and international media interviews, and added that he desired an opportunity to speak to American media outlets.

IMPENDING CARTER VISIT

17.(C) Asad also raised the issue of the upcoming visit of former President Jimmy Carter, stating he trusted President Carter and respected his "mature vision." He praised Carter's depth of knowledge and experience in the Middle East, and called Carter a "helpful" interlocutor who is "not bound by official USG policy and free to respond (to Asad) without any calculation."

18.(U) Codel Kaufman has cleared this message.
CONNELLY